

Chapter Twelve

Resolution

The community and educational leaders of Oswego, such as Faust, Mizen, and Swetman, along with Smart, had done all that they could to improve the lot, not only of the refugee children, but the Shelter's adults as well. At least with regard to the fate of all the refugees their best effort was not enough. The two days of hearings on June 25 and 26, 1945, before the subcommittee on Fort Ontario of The Immigration and Naturalization Committee of the House ended with four of the six members voting to admit the refugees under existing immigration law. However, when the full committee received the report on July 6, 1945 it reversed itself. It became evident that the effort to resolve the problems of the refugees at Fort Ontario would fail by several votes, Dickstein allowed the committee to vote on the resolution which reached the exact opposite conclusion as that which had been sought by virtually all of the witnesses and Dickstein himself.

The resolution passed by the full committee read: "(1) that the Departments of State and Justice should ascertain the practicability of returning the refugees to their homelands; (2) that the 'continued expense of \$600,000 per annum' in maintaining the Shelter is 'inadvisable, unwarranted, and should be discontinued' and (3) that if the refugee return is not practicable, the Attorney General should declare them to be 'illegally present in the country,' and 'undertake deportation proceedings.'" ¹ Though the committee hearings had kept the issue of the refugees before the national media, the effort had failed to sway even the most accessible components of the political establishment.

A majority of the full committee simply voted to send the refugees home.

Surprisingly, two who came to Oswego and had there voted to offer the refugees legal admission to America, also voted for returning the refugees to Europe. A minority of the full committee, who actually supported the refugees' cause, also voted with the majority simply to force the issue and end the impasse. In *Token Refuge* (1986), Lowenstein described the impasse as follows "The subcommittee voted unanimously to close the camp – no one wished to see Uncle Sam spend \$600,000 to maintain the facility for another year – but they could not agree on the disposition of its population."² Some members even voted for the measure believing the whole issue was more properly in the jurisdiction of the Attorney General. The thinking was once the refugees were declared illegal aliens designated for deportation there would be a due process protocol available to them. That due process had specific deadlines which could offer several venues where the refugees and their supporters would have the opportunity to plead their case.

The failure of the Dickstein committee proved to be a serious setback for the cause of the refugees. That development was partially offset by another event of more subtle magnitude. Since the beginning of 1945 Secretary Ickes had become more vocal in advocating for the refugees, who were only technically his charges. This change in attitude on the part of Ickes might have been a product of the *Bondy Report*, which had been so critical of the WRA, and by Gruber's personal advocacy on the refugees' behalf. Nevertheless, Ickes was offering opinions where he had previously been uncharacteristically reticent.

With the death of Roosevelt, Ickes attempted to resurrect the level of influence he once had held with Roosevelt with Truman. The true administrative authority for the

refugees still resided with the WRB. Ickes used this somewhat less-than-absolute connection to advocate for greater liberties for the Shelter residents. The expansion of leave for the refugees was viewed as an alternative to outright admission into America. The plan appeared to be to grant the refugees longer and longer leaves with relatives and friends willing to accept responsibility for them, and then eventually release the refugees to these same custodians until their legal status was determined.

Not all the refugees wanted to remain in America, however. On August 28, 1945 fifty-three Shelter residents departed for repatriation to Yugoslavia. This group, all gentiles, was the second contingent of the sixty-nine refugees which returned to Europe. Thirteen Yugoslavs had previously returned to Europe in May 1945.

On September 14, 1945 Truman signed the executive order abolishing the WRB. This action effectively transferred the authority for the Shelter from the WRB, which viewed the refugees as part of the international problem of displaced persons, to the WRA, which saw the Shelter as merely another internment camp to be phased out of existence with the advent of peace. With the WRB no longer an obstacle, Ickes was free to lobby the President directly.

Another development bode well for the refugees, Attorney General Francis Biddle, who was inflexible where he believed due process of law was a question, resigned and was replaced by the more adventurous and flexible Thomas C. Clark. Biddle's belief that the refugees might constitute a security threat had been an obstacle within the administration for resolving the impasse.

While the political structures were shifting in the gradual transition from the

Roosevelt Administration to the Truman Administration, all the while Smart was lobbying from his new headquarters in New York City for the refugees' release. From Manhattan Smart formed Friends of Fort Ontario Guest-Refugees, Inc. This organization launched a campaign that could only be described as a precursor of the modern political action committee. Smart had formed a committee comprised of celebrities which sent out mass mailings, pressured Capitol Hill, and wrote countless letters to government officials.

On December 5, 1945 there began a flurry of meetings in Washington, D.C. which could only be described as a "critical mass." All of the federal agencies which had any input into the issue of the refugees at Fort Ontario, that is, the Departments of State, Interior and Justice, began meeting to iron out differences and establish a unified approach to the resolution of the problem posed by the refugees. With Dickstein and Senator Richard Russell representing the Legislative Branch, within days an agreement was drafted which addressed all of the technical obstacles to admitting the refugees under immigration law. With all of the elements in place, all that was required was approval from the White House.

On December 22, 1945 Truman signed an executive order which permitted the refugees at Fort Ontario to be admitted under immigration quotas established by law. The process was simple. The refugees would travel the three hours from Oswego to Niagara Falls, Ontario where, after spending less than two hours in Canada, they could apply to be re-admitted as legitimate aliens. On January 17, 1946 the first contingent of refugees left the Shelter for Niagara Falls, Ontario. On February 5, 1946 the final contingent boarded the bus for the five-hour process of entering America legally. Most of the former Shelter

residents spent their first legitimate night in the United States in a hotel in Buffalo. From there the refugees were disbursed throughout America. In essence, a dilemma created by an executive order was only resolved by a subsequent executive order.

The Oswego Advisory Committee

Once the Advisory Committee had produced *The FDR Memorial* and its prominent members had testified before the Dickstein Committee, it seemed to fade from the scene. Some of its more ambitious members, particularly Mizen and Swetman, shifted the focus of their energies to the new national committee formed by Smart. Faust did not follow the lead of Mizen and Swetman who had joined Smart's new independent committee. There continued to be the need to deal with rumors, but the responsibility for that task was shifted by subsequent Shelter Directors from the Advisory Committee to the Shelter's staff.

When it became evident that the only way to resolve the issues regarding the refugees was to influence the White House and the Executive Branch to act, this effectively ended the Advisory Committee's role. The refugee children had settled into a comfortable routine at the school and though there were still hostile letters to the editor arriving almost daily at the local newspaper, this had little impact on the day-to-day lives of the refugee children. In essence, the early success of the Advisory Committee had contributed to its demise, as had the failure of the testimony before the Dickstein Committee to resolve the refugees' dilemma. Though the Advisory Committee existed in name until the last refugee left for Niagara Falls, Ontario, from the second summer on there had been no formal meetings, only exchanges of ideas via telephone and letter.

The Myth

The term “myth” is too often applied to fictional characters and events. The role played by Faust in the refugee children’s education was not mythological. It was real, and for the high school students it was significant. His contribution was significant in a way that may have promoted embellishment unintentionally. Faust was one of the first members of the Oswego community, along with Mizen, Swetman, Waterbury, and Father Shanahan, to step forward and advocate on behalf of the refugees. In essence, Faust was only one of several local leaders who volunteered early to help the refugees. In fact, Gruber could not remember if he was present at that first meeting in Smart’s office in August of 1944. The written record established that he was. However, Faust was not the group’s leader, merely a member. Swetman and Father Shanahan departed from Oswego before the resurgence in interest in the Emergency Refugee Shelter emerged. Waterbury died in 1953 and Mizen, despite his efforts to better the community, was never a popular figure in Oswego and would eventually close his law practice and move to California. Mizen had been in law practice with his brother Robert, who died unexpectedly during the summer of 1945. Attorney Richard Mitchell, who still practices law in Oswego and at this date is in his early nineties, suggested Harry Mizen was the aggressive partner, while Robert was the personable one. Robert Mizen’s death ended Harry Mizen’s ability to sustain a viable law practice. In short, Faust received all the credit for what a committee of which he was a member had done.

In contrast, Faust, principal of the high school for nearly a quarter century, was highly visible and a constant presence in the Oswego community. Furthermore, he was

very popular, not only for how he assisted the refugees, but as a fair and selfless educator. Faust treated the teachers with respect, a conduct not that common in that era, and dealt with the students with support and compassion. He did whatever was required to help his students succeed. What Faust did for the refugee children was merely his daily routine. He treated the refugee students with the same care, compassion and wisdom with which he treated all those whom he encountered in his schools.

For the refugee students who attended the high school, Faust was as much an indication of these students' new found freedom as was the Statue of Liberty. Imagine the impact of a warm greeting from a charismatic authority figure to a teenager who had spent the last years of their short lives in hiding for fear of being executed. What impact did the horrific injustice suffered by these youths have on their individual psychological self-image? For these young refugees Faust's combined charm and sincere compassion were perceived as an oasis in a desert of hostility and violence.

But Faust was not alone among the educators at the high school who helped the refugee students. Though it is not clear how many teachers agreed with Faust's views about the refugee students from the beginning, there was no doubt the leadership Faust provided encouraged all the teachers of the high school to follow his example. Every interview with former refugee high school students concurred with the conclusion that the high school had not only welcomed the Shelter students, but enabled them to thrive. Each former refugee student interviewed stated time and again that it was not just Faust, but the entire faculty that made them feel welcomed.

Faust's early support of the refugee students should not have been taken for

granted even though he was an educator. Faust embraced the issues represented by the presence of the refugee students immediately and without reservation. This is contrasted to Riley, who balked at first but came around within days and supported what had been Faust's position from the beginning. Middle School Principal Virginia Dean resisted helping the refugee students at first, which led to considerable problems, but in the end even she came around. The nuns at Saint Paul School would not have challenged Father Shanahan in any way. The principal would have simply done what Father Shanahan told her to do without question. Elementary School Number Two Principal Susan Donovan was like Faust, possibly just not receiving the praise because of the young age of her students. It was Donovan who so succinctly captured the pedagogic paradigm which should have guided all the educators of Oswego, as it had clearly guided Faust, when she testified before the Dickstein Committee and said, "... they are just like our own."³

One factor contributing to the development of Faust's reputation was the age of his students. Most of the refugee students who had graduated from high school were like Steffi Steinberg Winters. Winters had not attended school since she and her parents had fled Berlin six years earlier. When Winters accepted her diploma she was twenty years old, two years older than what would be considered a normal age for graduating. Her appreciation of Faust as an educator and a person was not just a manifestation of Faust's character, but also a product of Winters' relative maturity. Donovan might have been just as committed to her students as was Faust, as evidenced by her Congressional testimony, but her students were too immature to appreciate her and subsequently later tout her praises.

This is not to suggest that Faust was merely a welcoming authority figure for students deprived of so much for so long. Faust put forth the effort that no other educator did. Faust visited the camp first to invite the students to attend his school at a time they were still prohibited from leaving the Shelter. He did not just invite the youths of the Shelter to attend the school; according to Winters, Faust made a special effort to encourage the older students like herself to attend the high school, all of whom were very surprised to discover they were still eligible to do so under New York Education Law. When the refugee students were still quarantined Faust spent many hours there, interviewing all the high school-aged refugee students so that he could develop an individualized school curriculum. In short, Faust used the scheduling process to get to know each high school refugee student individually.

Another factor which contributed to the belief that Faust single-handedly produced the successful schooling program for the refugee children was the way in which Smart and WRA officials sought to work behind the scenes to accomplish their goals. In both Relocation Camps and at the Shelter, the WRA was relegated to what Smart had described as a custodial role. This meant that the WRA did not establish the overarching policy and much of the time did not even determine more mundane policies. After witnessing the brief and stormy tenure of the WRA's first Director, Dr. Milton Eisenhower, WRA officials like Smart resolved to challenge policies they disagreed with through less confrontational tactics. Smart created the Advisory Committee not only to advise him and to promote understanding between the Shelter and the community, but also to advocate for policies and services on behalf of the refugees which Smart as a federal

employee could not. This effort to make initiatives appear as being grassroots enhanced the reputations of community leaders like Faust at the expense of WRA officials like Smart and Ade. The educational policies put in place at the Shelter were an outgrowth of those developed by the WRA at the Relocation Centers. Faust clearly has received credit for much of the work actually accomplished by Smart and Ade.

Faust's contribution to the lives of the more than forty young people from the Shelter who attended Oswego High School was significant. Like Winters, Bukros and Manfred, many of those former refugee students point to the support and guidance offered by Faust and the teachers of Oswego High School as a seminal event in their lives. Yet Faust's contribution, however important it was, only affected at most forty-two out of 982. How did his contribution gain a reputation of such significance? Part of the answer was that as the reputation of the schooling program grew over time, and the relative importance of that program to the Shelter as a whole, so did the reputation of the schooling program's most visible advocate and prominent practitioner.

One contribution of the education program to the overall existence of the Shelter was that it helped to maintain hope among the broader population at the Shelter. The children leaving for school each morning was a powerful image contrasted to the frustrations produced by confinement and idleness. Adults kept behind barriers, even as largely symbolic as was the Shelter's ragged fence, must have marveled at the impact freedom had on the refugee youths. Not only were they leaving the encampment each morning, the Shelter's youths were evidently ecstatic in exercising their new found freedom.

The success of the schooling was not just a symbolic beacon of hope, a tonic for all of the problems confronting the Shelter and its residents. The success of the process which allowed the refugee children to attend the schools of Oswego encouraged both Smart and the Advisory Committee to attempt to resolve the Shelter's other problems in a similar manner. The early success of the effort to place refugee students in the schools of Oswego cascaded over into the issue of higher education. The attendance of the younger shelter students in the schools of Oswego exposed a simple and irrefutable logic even the jaded bureaucrats in Washington could not resist. That is, there was a college which was as physically accessible to the Shelter as both the elementary and secondary school were. Though it was clear that the interventions of Mrs. Roosevelt and Morgenthau were critical, the success of the elementary and secondary school programs clearly led to the advocacy of the effort to admit refugee students to college.

The success of the schooling component allowed the Shelter's administration to focus on other educational programs, particularly those most beneficial to the broader population of Fort Ontario, such as English language instruction and vocational training. Had the schooling issue not been resolved employing resources outside the Shelter, Smart might not have had sufficient resources within the Shelter to adequately address those broader educational needs.

The ancillary educational programs such as the nursery school, scouting, and the summer and weekend recreational programs, the latter which were devised by Quaker volunteers, might not have come to fruition had not such a large part of the program represented by schooling been established early with such little need for ongoing

intervention. The success in the schools of Oswego encouraged both volunteers from among the townspeople and from among the refugee population to invest their own individual labors towards the success of these smaller educational programs. As the adage states, “success breeds success.” In summary, the success represented by the refugee students attending the schools of Oswego was not insignificant.

The success story of the refugee students attending the schools of Oswego played a significant role in the media’s view of the Shelter. Though it was never specifically stated, it was clear that the refugee children’s academic performance was being touted as an indication that these people were worthy to be Americans. Even in the testimony before the Dickstein Committee, academic success constituted the primary theme of about half of the witnesses who testified.

When Smart resigned his position as Shelter Director he took two steps which reflected upon the successes of the Advisory Committee. First, Smart asked them to assist him in advocating more aggressively on behalf of the refugees. Though the effort began on the eve of Roosevelt’s death, Smart and the committee would incorporate this dramatic event into their plans. This produced the *FDR Memorial* which was simply a petition for again redressing the injustices encountered by the refugees at Fort Ontario.

Second, Smart created on a national level a committee which was similar in structure and purpose to the Oswego Advisory Committee. Just as the Advisory Committee had been a committee of local celebrities, political officials, and community activists, so too was Smart’s national committee comprised of national figures of similar renown. It was clear that Smart had considered the Advisory Committee a success for he

sought to re-create it on the national level in his committee Friends of Fort Ontario Guest-Refugees.

The importance of this story is that it depicts a series of events where collaboration between citizens and various government agencies worked not only for the common good but to produce an unselfish response to individuals in need. Smart, an official of the federal government, effectively worked with the leaders of the Oswego Community like Faust, Mizen, Waterbury, Swetman and Father Shanahan, to accomplish a worthy goal. The effort was non-partisan, non political, non-denominational, and generally free of any tainting by selfish motives. Particularly, it was a story where educators like Faust and Swetman played a prominent, pro-active role for the betterment of the community and fostered a response to the needs of less fortunate human beings. The emerging myths tend to mask the true dimensions and importance of what actually transpired.

The growth of the story of Ralph M. Faust to almost mythic proportions was no greater than the manner in which the whole story of the Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter has grown. The people of Oswego could be proud of how their community responded when called upon to help downtrodden strangers. Though there were bigoted and uncharitable elements within the Oswego community they were likely in the minority. The government officials of the WRA deserved to be commended. Individuals at the WRA like Smart and Ade sought to ameliorate, both at the Relocation Centers and later at Fort Ontario, the inhuman and often unconstitutional conditions they found themselves administering. The members of the non-profit Safe Haven, Inc. should be praised for their unselfish efforts to keep the history of the Shelter alive and in doing so reminding

Americans that there could have been a much different American response to the Holocaust. Dr. Gruber deserves the highest praise. Almost single-handedly she has kept the story of the Shelter alive, as she has other stories about Jewish refugees.

But the whole story of the Shelter has grown; what might even be called a subtle but significant change. At fund raising events and facility dedications the events surrounding the Shelter, the events of that eighteen month period, are too often portrayed in a way that is reliant on one of the earliest misconceptions about the refugees. The myth has evolved that the refugees were saved by their voyage to Oswego. This has become the mantra, particularly for the politicians who have helped secure essential grants and other forms of support for the museum's creation. The truth was that the refugees who arrived at Fort Ontario in the summer of 1944 were not saved from the Holocaust by their voyage to Oswego. Each and every one of the 982 was already free and living in liberated Italy. If anyone had saved them from the ravages of the German slaughter or Fascist imprisonment, it was their own individual courage and resilience supplemented in many instances by the help and protection of compassionate Italians.

What Oswego truly represented was not a haven from either impending death or personal harm. It represented an opportunity to share in the wealth and freedom Americans have come to believe is their birthright. The emergence of mythic accounts of history are often provoked by cultural needs. In American culture it is easier to imagine heroic personalities resolving all complex problems than to fathom solutions crafted by complex, collaborative efforts between individuals, in and out of government. It is also easier for Americans to imagine a haven from harm or death than to deal with the image of

a haven of opportunity. For Americans to acknowledge that Oswego was a haven where the refugees merely sought to have access to the education, security, opportunity, and rights our citizens possessed as Americans would be to admit that we live in a world where America has the responsibility to promote a more complex and demanding form of equity with regard to other less fortunate human beings in the world. This pro-active notion of equity is one which incorporates the sharing of this nation's vast wealth and nurturing of opportunity through the promotion of justice. Ralph Faust, for one, clearly lived his life as if such a world already existed.

Endnotes

¹ House Resolution 52 1945, July 6, 1945, as cited in "In Steps Toward Freedom," by Edward Marks February 1946, Summary of Events File, Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter Collection, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York.

² Lowenstein 1986, 125.

³ Dickstein Hearings 1945, 60.